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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the theoretical base and operational design of a neighborhood-based primary prevention program that seeks to enhance the development of very young children by focusing on the role of parents' social networks in supporting early child-rearing. Efforts to strengthen parents' involvement in and utilization of an informal network of supportive relationships with others are described in terms of a mutual aid system with other parents involved in the program. The program's evaluation strategy, which examines variations in parents' program experiences in relation to parent and child functioning, is discussed. Implications for prevention programs for parent-child relations are suggested.
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Strengthening Parents' Social Networks: An Ecological
Approach to Primary Prevention*

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Strengthening Parents' Social Networks: An Ecological
Approach to Primary Prevention

Douglas R. Powell

This paper describes briefly a primary prevention program that seeks to enhance the development of very young children through a focus on the processes and conditions of parenthood.¹ The program is a neighborhood-based effort that gives special emphasis to the role of parents' social networks in supporting early child rearing. This paper discusses the program's theoretical base, design, operations and evaluation strategy.

Theoretical Orientation

Historically in this country most professional efforts to enhance the development of young children through a focus on parents have dealt with attributes of parents rather than the social contexts in which parents function. For instance, the child study movement of the 1880s disseminated to parents instructional techniques appropriate to children's "natural needs" and in the 1920s attempts to improve parents' child-rearing knowledge and practices were made through the involvement of mothers in nursery schools. An examination of contemporary parent education programs also suggests that the vast majority deal with characteristics of parents (i.e. child development knowledge, child care attitudes).

¹For more detailed descriptions of the program, see Powell, 1979a, 1979b, 1980.

Increasingly there are suggestions that the social contexts in which families function have a significant influence on parent-child relations, and that programs designed to enhance child functioning should focus on the ecology of parenthood. An analysis of research-based early intervention programs led Bronfenbrenner (1974) to conclude there is a need for "ecological intervention in the form of family support systems" which enable parents to foster their child's development. Schaefer (1976) reached a similar conclusion through a review of research evidence that suggests social stresses and supports may influence the parental care of children.

Social Networks and Child Rearing. It appears from research findings that social networks² have a significant influence on parent-child relations and hold considerable potential as a target of professional intervention efforts. There are essentially four different ways in which social networks may contribute to the quality of parent-child relations. Personal networks have been shown to provide (a) instrumental support, (b) emotional support, (c) referral and information, and (d) child-rearing controls and role models. (For literature reviews, see Lee, 1979; Unger & Powell, 1980.)

Instrumental support consists of material goods and services to an individual to alleviate financial and economic situations or crises. For low-income families and those living in crisis conditions, it appears there is a heavy reliance on material support from social network sources. For instance, an important study by Stack (1974) found social networks to be an exceedingly critical support system for low-income black families.

²A social network consists of a person's relationships with relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers and other acquaintances who interact with the person. Each member of a network does not necessarily know or interact with every other member, and networks do not have clear boundaries as do social groups. The common characteristics of members of a network is their relationship to the ego or person (Sarason, Carroll, Maton, Cohen & Lorentz, 1977).

Emotional support involves the communication of information to an individual that he or she is loved, esteemed, and mutually obligated to members of his/her social network (Cobb, 1976). For example, in a study of women who had experienced high levels of stress before and during their pregnancies, it was found that women with high amounts of emotional support had considerably fewer medical complications during pregnancy than women with low levels of social support (Nuckolls, Cassel & Kaplan, 1972). Other studies have found that supportive interactions among individuals are protective against health consequences of life stress, including arthritis, depression and alcoholism (see Cobb, 1976).

Social networks also serve a mediating and referral role which includes a person's use of and relationship to other informal and formal services. Studies have found utilization of health care services to be influenced by characteristics of a person's social network. Freidson (1960) found the procedure of seeking medical help to involve an intricate network of lay consultants, each of whom assisted in diagnosing the health symptom and prescribing treatment or making referral to another informal or formal source. In addition, social networks have been found to be related to the utilization of prenatal care services (McKinlay, 1973) and use of Family Service Agency services (Kammeyer & Bolton, 1968).

Cochran and Brassard (1979) have suggested that personal social networks influence parents by providing child-rearing controls and by serving as role models. Further, they theorize that social networks have direct influence on a child by providing cognitive and social stimulation, role models, and opportunities for engaging in significant social relations.

Social networks may have an important influence on a parent's receptivity to new information, especially from professional non-network sources. In a carefully designed study of the effects of three different home-based infant education curricula, Kessen and Fein (1975) found external family relations to play an important role in determining maternal behaviors and responsiveness to change agents from outside the family milieu. The study found unexpectedly that parents belonging to extensive family networks were more open to change and more responsive to curriculum interventions than parents with restricted family networks. Kessen and Fein tentatively interpreted the finding as an indication that extensive social networks may provide parents with a secure, stable framework which makes it easier to welcome and utilize new information from persons who are outside the family consellation.

Program Design and Operations

Interest in the effects of social contexts in general and social networks in particular on parent-child relations is the basis of an experimental primary prevention project titled the Child and Family Neighborhood Program. The program utilizes a social interactional perspective of families as socialization agents. Our assumption is that child behavior and development are functions of a number of interconnected social-environment influences which socialize parents into specific patterns of relationships and interaction with their child(ren), and affect a family's ability to cope with normal stress and unusual crises. The family unit is seen as the primary social context of parent-child interaction and child development, with several layers of interdependent social-environment influences interacting with the family system.

The program, then, reflects an emerging paradigm in the social sciences and human services which adheres to a socio-ecological perspective of services within a family and community context as contrasted to an individualistic, professional-institutional perspective of services to isolated individuals by a professional in an institutional setting (Schaefer, 1977).

A major aim of the program is to strengthen parents' utilization of informal sources of support in carrying out child-rearing functions. Programmatically this is done by enabling parents to form a mutual support system with other parents involved in the program and by encouraging parents to maximize use of their social networks for tapping informal resources.

The program works with clusters of 10 to 12 parents and their young children twice weekly for two-hour periods in a home-like setting with paraprofessionals as the primary staff persons. The clustering of parents into small groups is integral to the development of mutual support systems of program participants. Parents begin the program when their child is under six months of age, and hopefully remain until the child is three years of age.

Group sessions focus on topics pertaining to the process of parent-child interaction and the conditions of parenthood. The latter area has been found to be particularly fruitful with regards to enhancing the development and maintenance of mutual helping systems among parents. The area includes such topics as adjustment to unemployment and economic uncertainty, tenants' rights and landlord relations, child-rearing value conflicts with relatives, and domestic violence. Typically topics are approached from a problem-solving perspective and group members become

important resources to one another in generating and, oftentimes, implementing solutions. Numerous efforts are made to avoid fostering parental dependency on the staff; the emphasis is on creating and sustaining an interdependent group of parents.

The bulk of program activity takes place in a renovated home which provides a non-threatening, informal setting. The program is located in a two-by-four mile neighborhood which is densely populated and comprised primarily of small multiple-dwelling rental units. The population group is white, and of low-income and working class status.

Evaluation Strategy

The evaluation of the Child and Family Neighborhood Program seeks to link program processes with parent-child outcome data. The evaluation design stems from a skeptical view of the notion that evaluations of intensive human service programs can be reduced to linear causal relationships. The evaluation strategy is designed to examine the relationship of parents' experiences in the program to the quality of parent-child interaction and to characteristics of parents' social networks. The aim is to identify correlates of parents' program experiences and of variations in parent and parent-child outcome data.

The effort to describe parents' program experiences is particularly salient. Most evaluations of human service programs give minimal attention to the treatment variable and tend to assume the treatment has relatively equal influence on all participants. It is anticipated that an examination of variations in program experiences in relation to parental characteristics and outcome data will have implications for the design and implementation of

similar human service programs. Indices of program experience include attendance, relations with other parents, relations with staff, use of program for special needs, and nature of verbal contributions to group discussions.

With regards to social networks, a major evaluation interest is the relationship between parents' social networks and parent-child interaction. Preliminary analyses have shown that parents who experienced high levels of stress were more likely to be actively involved with their infant when they had weekly contact with kin and friends than when they were infrequently in contact. Parents also appeared more responsive to their children if they were receiving material resources from their network members (Unger, 1979). Further, preliminary analyses indicate that the social networks of program participants are undergoing change, including a significant amount of self-disclosure among participants (Powell, 1980).

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